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THE OLD CHICAGO ROAD

By JESSE SETTLINGTON BIRCH

(Read at an old settlers' meeting in Fowler, Ind., August 26, 1914)

The first roads in Benton county, like those in all new countries, were the shortest that could be laid out between given points, wet impassable places and creek fordings being taken into consideration. Some landmark serves as a guide when the trails crossed. The county was marked by Indian trails that were nobody knew how old and led no white man knew where. As the county became more thickly settled section lines and surveys were followed.

Many State roads were established, three of which, the Chicago, Fafayette and Michigan City roads, crossed Benton county. Only a brief description of the two latter roads is here given.

The Lafayette road was established by the General Assembly of 1840. It was surveyed by Henry Robertson and was an extension of the road from Lafayette to Sugar Grove, as approved by an act, February 7, 1835; to Parish Grove and there to intersect the Chicago-Vincennes road as near the grove as possible. From the east line of the country to Parish Grove this road followed the "Old Army Trail," the trail over which Gen. Walker marched government troops in 1832, to take part in the "Black Hawk" war in Illinois. When the grove was reached Gen. Walker was met by a courier who informed him that the Indians had been pacified. The troops returned along the same trail.

The Michigan City road was surveyed by Henry Robertson in 1841. It was to have run from Michigan City, Ind., to St. Louis, Mo. At that time Michigan City was a rival of Chicago and wanted the road in order to control the trade in this territory. How far north or south of Oxford the survey was made we do not know. A portion of it is still known in Oxford as the Michigan Road and lies east of the Lake Erie & Western railroad station. The swamps between Michigan City and the rich territory to the south and west were so numerous that the road was impracticable. Michigan City did not recover from the panic of 1837, so Chicago passed her in the race for commercial supremacy.

The Chicago road, the subject of this sketch, was established

at an early date. From the records of the acts of the General Assembly and other sources this road must have been formed by the junction at or near Williamsport (Warren county), of the State road extended in 1830, from Indianapolis through Crawfordsville to Williamsport, thence to the State line near Raub, thence to Chicago; and the road running from Vincennes through Gallatin, (Parke county), Covington, Attica and to Lafayette, as shown on a Mitchell map of 1834. The road entered Benton county south of Boswell and followed what is now the Williamsport and Boswell gravel road from the county line to Boswell. At the county line was a settlement called Petersburg, which consisted of a general store, blacksmith shop and four or five residences. The business portion was in Benton county and the residence portion in Warren county. In the early 60's the Bunnell Bros. kept the general store. They sold to James A. McKnight and John Spies. When the Lake Erie & Western railway was built and Boswell platted they moved their stock to that place. The Chicago road was intersected by the Lafayette road about a mile south of Parish Grove. At the intersection Thomas Torrence kept a tavern.

In the grove was another tavern kept by Robert Alexander. The Alexander tavern was the most noted one on the Chicago road. Here was toddy and a frontier welcome for the traveler, homeseeker, or hunter. Many of the latter came to hunt deer, wild turkeys, prairie chickens and quail. In the spring and autumn myriads of wild geese and ducks were to be seen and the heavens were darkened by flocks of wild pigeons. The tavern was a modest affair. There were several bed rooms, the big dining-room, and the indispensable bar-room where the men loafed. Around the big fireplace on a cold night mine host entertained his guests with the traditions of the famed grove and of the Indians who made it their home. There were tales of those lost on the prairie, the dreaded prairie fire, and the bravery and self-denial of the early pioneers. The grove was a favorite camping place, as it afforded shelter in time of storms, furnished wood for the camp fires and close to the tavern was a spring of pure cold water. In the 40's and 50's there was a constant stream of "prairie schooners" over this road. Through Benton county it wound over the broad prairie broken only by Parish and Sugar groves, while farther to the north it led through bog and fen. The swift running deer often crossed the path and the gaunt wolf sniffed the evening meal and with his echoing howls called his ever hungry comrades. There were tragedies on the old Chicago road. Many an emigrant or some member of his

family sickened and died and found a resting place in an unmarked grave along its way.

The Chicago Road was a historic thoroughfare in its time, it being the main artery of communication for travel from Indianapolis and Vincennes to the thriving city on the lake. When Chicago became a live stock market thousands of cattle and horses were driven over it. In places it was from thirty to forty rods wide, the teamsters leaving the deeply worn places to find better footing, especially during a wet time. The trail could be followed by the timothy and blue grass that grew along the way, having been started from seed that had been dropped by teamsters going to and from Chicago, or the land hunters from Ohio, Kentucky and Virginia on their way to the Northwest. In the fall many hauled apples from Southern Indiana to Chicago and many were the small boys who begged pennies from their mothers to buy the luscious fruit. Evidence of this old trail still remains, the beaten path in places being easily discernable across the fields.

At the several stopping places taverns were to be found for the accommodation of the travelers. The numbers and the frontier sociability at these places did much to soften the asperities of travel especially during inclement weather. After Parish Grove was passed going north the following were the stopping places: Sumner's Grove, Bunkum, Buckhorn Tavern, Beaver Creek, Big Spring, Mommence, Yellow Head Point, Blue Island, Chicago. The trip required from six to eight days, all depending upon the condition of the roads and streams, the latter being forded. This road was abandoned in 1865 or 1866.

The Benton county pioneers made the trip to Chicago in companies sometimes ten to twelve in number. The wagons were usually drawn by oxen, two yoke to a wagon. In the fall when the roads were good they often drove two teams of horses to a wagon and when the city was reached one of the teams was sold. Travel to the south on this road was mostly to Crawfordsville, where the land office was located, or to the Yountsville woolen mills close by.

There are still a few living in the county who went to and fro over the old Chicago Road, and as they journeyed along the winding trail watched the days go over the Western plains.